

Sermon Notes



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This Is Why It Is Called Good News, part 8

First Corinthians 3:10-15

You'd have thought we'd covered it by now. A 6-part series on Monday mornings back in the first year of OSHC, then a long series called "Heaven, Hell...and a God of Love" that we finished just over a year ago. Here we are in the last of this current series on God's love for all and His promise that all of us will be reconciled to Christ.

Still, many have a very hard time letting go of hell. We are speaking of hell here, as the traditional teaching that declares that most of humanity will be in an eternal torture pit, fully conscious and aware of their horrible pain, for eternity without end. You'd think we'd want to run from such an idea, but some just can't let go.

Here is where I will rub a lot of them the wrong way, but I believe it is time to challenge them. The fact is, I don't think they believe in that hell at all, regardless of their protestations to the contrary.

I'll explain by taking you to the deserts of Egypt, to the modern city of Akhmim, in 1886. French archaeologists, led by Urbain Bouriant, found a manuscript that had been reverently buried with a monk. It was a book that had been declared noncanonical by the Councils of Carthage and Rome way back in the mid-300s. We knew of it only by some quotes and by the fact that it was rejected as scripture. This find was a true rediscovery and caused quite a stir.

I would actually love to go over the entire book and explain its history and theology. It is a strange book, to say the least. It was probably written around 120-150 AD and had some docetic teachings (that Jesus didn't die on the cross but was taken away and a man was put in his place), a talking cross that follows Jesus into and out of the tomb, and a complete exoneration of Pilate.

But the real centerpiece of the Apocalypse of Peter (which was not written by Peter and no scholar has ever believed it was) is hell. Here is where I need to NOT give you a lot of information. Why? Roman historian Ramsay MacMullen, says that these Christian writings are the only sadistic literature I am aware of in the ancient world." It makes horror novels by Stephen King and Peter Straub look like children's nursery rhymes.

Because children listen to these lessons alongside their parents, or in the car as they are being driven here and there, I cannot describe what the Apocalypse of Peter says about hell. If you've ever read Dante's "Inferno," turn up the volume from there about ten times over, and you'll approach the absolutely terrifying and horrid descriptions of torture and mutilation found in this rejected book.

This book takes the hell found in Greek philosophy and makes it so outrageous that most of us cannot get past a few pages of modern translations. Here is the matter that concerns us today: this was not fringe literature. It was widely circulated and even appears in the first list of Bible books, the Muratorian fragment.

We don't talk about hell like the Apocalypse of Peter or even Dante's Inferno today. We talk about being separated from God for eternity. That was the first way I tried to square the circle and hold the belief that God is love, PLUS God would send people to hell. The fires, the binding, the darkness, and the falling had to be metaphorical ways of describing what it was like for a spirit to be separated from its Maker for eternity...right?

Christian theologians after Augustine, such as Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, don't give us room for such a compromise. They used the phrase "fire and brimstone" so often that it became a well-used phrase in the English language. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" was the most famous sermon in early American history and ran through many printings as it was disseminated throughout the Colonies and right into the veins of American religion.

Some people are comforted by the existence of this fire and brimstone. They have been hurt, legitimately, truly hurt by others. They see Hitler getting away with shooting himself in the head and say, "That's not enough!" I would agree! That hardly seems just. We need him to suffer for every single one of the millions of innocent men, women, and children who died because of his insane ideologies.

So...hell? Here's the problem. Even if the Bible taught the version of hell you were taught and say you still believe in, I don't believe you. Instead of me asking the usual question about whether or not you believe in hell or whether or not you think you are going to hell, let me ask a question you probably have never been asked.

Do you live as if you believe in hell? If we were to audit your weekly budget or daily schedule, would we be able to discern a belief in a hellish afterlife for all who do not share your religious convictions? How much time, money, and comfort are you sacrificing right now to help people – friends, family, members, neighbors, coworkers, strangers on the street, children born in far-off countries – avoid hell?

Is that a harsh question? So is believing a lot of people are going to be tortured for eternity and not doing a thing about it. (Well, we built a church building and advertised our meetings!)

Christians, with the most liberal definition of that term, only make up 30% of the earth's population at present, 2000 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Would that be true if we truly believed in the hell we teach?

Ask your church leaders for a look at the budget. How much is going directly toward saving our neighbors and those in far-off lands from an eternal torture pit? I'm going out on a limb here and saying you will not be happy with what you find.

In fact, let's go even deeper. Those of us who believe in the love of God and in the ultimate reconciliation of all things to Him, whether on the earth, above the earth, or below the earth, have some matters to discuss as well. The Sermon on the Mount is full of instructions about caring for the poor and using our money, goods, and time to help others. How much of your church budget goes into that?

We proudly support Graceworks, Lifeline, and One Generation Away because we know they are helping us fulfill the mandate given to us by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 25. We also happily team up with established charities with which you are involved whenever possible. We can do that because quite a few of you support us, proving that we can look at your checkbook and see your priorities match with those of Jesus: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Believing that the love of God is for all His children and that all will be saved, though many will be saved through fire, does not dampen our zeal when it comes to helping the poor, loving our neighbor, being kind at every single opportunity, and living out the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

You see, we believe that God will still be God after our death. Yes, we die. Yes, there is judgment. But the passing of judgment does not mean an eternity separated from God, an eternity in flames paying for temporary sins and faults. We believe God is love after our death as He is love now. The story does not end when our graves are filled in.

Isn't that the point of the cross and the empty tomb?

So, let me ask all of us a question: do we live as we say we believe? Can we prove that we believe what we profess to believe?

I ask these questions, not to lay any burdens on you, but to encourage you to love and good works. Not because good works will save us, but because that is what our Father calls us to do, and it is time to be about our Father's business.